

DOORS OF PERCEPTION

In the second in our series of special reports on psychological theories, Gladeana McMahon looks at what cognitive behavioural coaching can bring to coaching and mentoring interventions

Illustration Nick Lowndes

In the 1960s, US psychiatrist Aaron Temkin Beck noticed that his patients tended to engage in 'internal dialogue', as if they were talking to themselves. He realised that there was a link between thoughts and feelings and he created the term 'automatic thoughts' to describe emotion-filled thoughts that pop up in the mind. Beck found that people weren't always fully aware of such thoughts but could learn to identify and report them, and thus overcome their particular difficulties. And so Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) was born, which would later spawn Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (CBC).

Beck, now a professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, is credited as the founding father of CBT (Curwen, Palmer & Ruddell, 2000) but there are a number of other key players who have made their own unique contributions to its theory and practice. These include: Albert Ellis, Maxie C Maultsby, Michael Mahoney, Donald Meichenbaum, Christine Padesky and David Burns.

Originally named 'cognitive therapy' because of its emphasis on thinking, it is now known as CBT because it has incorporated behavioural techniques as well. The balance between the cognitive and the behavioural elements varies among the different therapies of this type, but all come under the umbrella term CBT.

Since its birth, CBT has undergone successful scientific trials and has been applied to a wide variety of problems. The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE), an independent organisation responsible for providing national guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention and treatment of ill health, has developed a series of guidelines. Using the expertise of the NHS, healthcare professionals, patients, industry and the academic world, it has evaluated a number of approaches to the treatment of conditions such as depression, anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, sexual dysfunction and self-harming tendencies, and has recommended CBT as either the treatment of choice or main treatment for such conditions.

CBT is based on the theory that it's not situations that cause distress, but the individual meanings we give to them. If our thoughts are negative, they impede our ability to do those things that challenge what we perceive to be true. Through the process of identifying and re-evaluating self-defeating thinking, an individual is persuaded to engage in more effective ways of thinking and behaving.

CBC – guided discovery

CBC does not give individuals answers to their difficulties but rather, through a collaborative process called 'guided discovery', assists them to devise their own conclusions and solutions. Guided discovery is based on 'socratic questioning' whereby the coach asks a series of questions that enables the individual to become aware of the way he or she is thinking.

The term derives from the method of philosophical enquiry originally developed by the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. The practice involves asking a series of questions surrounding a central issue to help the individual identify his or her ideas on the subject

being explored. Questions such as, ‘What do you mean by your difficulties relating to others?’ or ‘How does your relationship with your peers relate to your anxiety?’ are good examples. Socratic questioning promotes insight, allowing a more rational decision-making process to take place. It can move an individual from his or her limiting style of thinking to a more flexible system of identifying problem-solving strategies.

CBC is time-limited, solution-focused and based in the present. Historical material is only sought to elicit information about why and how past events have shaped the individual’s way of thinking and behaving. Coaching aims to assist individuals to achieve goals. It does so by taking into account the need for self-awareness of moods and emotions and, in this sense, assists people to become more emotionally intelligent by understanding one’s own emotions, motivations and ways of being, as well as those of others.

CBC is ‘psycho-educative’ – its goal is to help the individual develop the necessary skills to become their own coach in the future. As the client becomes aware of their own thinking style, its strengths and limitations, and alternative ways of thinking and behaving, they become more flexible. By using this newly acquired knowledge, the individual develops more effective ways of dealing with challenges and goal attainment.

The number and length of sessions depends on the individual’s circumstances. For example, a programme of six, 90-minute sessions could be delivered as one session a week or fortnight for three sessions and then one session a month for the remaining three. Alternatively, it may be more helpful to engage in one three-hour session in order to break the back of a particular issue, following this session with shorter sessions on a less regular basis.

The behavioural contract

At the beginning of the coaching process a “behavioural contract” (McMahon, 2006; Skiffington & Zeus, 2003) should be drawn up which takes into account the needs of the sponsoring organisation and the changes required from a corporate perspective, the needs of the coaching client and the changes they want to make and the thoughts of the coach who synthesises this information into a

series of ‘objectives’ and associated ‘outcomes’. For example, the organisation may wish to see an individual improve their communication skills in order to become a more effective leader and the individual may want to gain confidence when dealing with superiors. Both of these statements are regarded as overall objectives. However, neither specifies what would need to be different for there to be a positive outcome or some sort of measurable change, or how the organisation or individual will measure the change. A series of further questions are used to elicit measurable outcomes such as: “If you

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Case study 1: Confidence

Michael was the director of strategy, and a board member of a prestigious city institution. He had instigated a number of projects that were regarded as being of significant benefit to the business. However, he had found that his positive start was now being undermined by an inconsistency in his approach.

Although successful, he believed he could have achieved far more in his working life if he had not been held back with what he termed “a lack of confidence”. Michael felt this manifested itself in anxiety and an inconsistency in the way he managed situations such as board meetings. A coaching programme of 12, one-and-a-half hour sessions was agreed. During the behavioural contracting stage the identified outcomes included, ‘Being able to devise strategies for consistent presentation of ideas at board meetings’, ‘identifying self-defeating thinking styles and appropriate counter-measures’ and ‘to minimise using a scale of 0-8 (0 = none and 8 = serious anxiety) the personal experience of anxiety from 6 to 3’.

A series of psychometric tests were employed to identify his personality type and associated strengths and weaknesses, as a way of helping him highlight the skills he needed to develop. CBC helped Michael to identify his thinking style. By focusing on his thoughts and feelings he was able to see how his current thinking style had a negative impact on his performance. He became aware of how the inconsistency he experienced related directly to his perception of situations. One of the key challenges Michael faced was a fear of failure that manifested itself in a preoccupation with what people would think about him. He recognised that this type of thinking stopped him from being able to make objective judgements. Michael’s ‘homework’ was designed to help him identify his thoughts, the feelings these generated, and the behaviours he then manifested together with the counter-measures he could employ.

By the end of the coaching programme, Michael had become more consistent in his presentation to others and in his personal thinking style and was able to cite a number of examples of dealing with difficult meetings in a calm and effective manner. He was also able to give examples of the comments received that confirmed that others had perceived a change in him. Since completion of his coaching programme, Michael is now seen as a key player in the organisation.

were more confident, what would you be doing differently?”, and “if X were a more effective leader, what behaviour would they be engaging in that would be different?”

Consideration is also given to the Key Performance Indicators already in use in the organisation and how these can be used to measure change.

The role of the coach is to ensure that the outcomes are clearly stated, that all parties know what is expected and that the number of desired outcomes can be obtained in the specified time. In addition, during the contracting period, agreement is also reached on the type and method of feedback to be provided to the organisation, the parameters of confidentiality and the terms and conditions related to the coaching assignment.

Once all these factors have been agreed, the contract can be signed off by all parties and used to evaluate the success of the coaching sessions. There are, of course, occasions when the contract may need to be amended during the coaching programme if new information comes to light or if circumstances change. In effect, the behavioural contract sets the agenda for change.

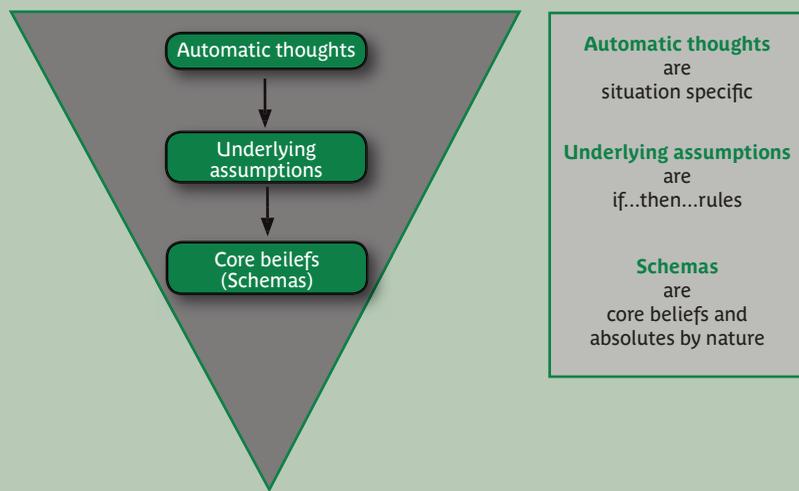
Sessions start with the coach ascertaining the client’s current mood as well as what has happened to the client since the previous meeting. The coach then refers the client back to the behavioural contract so they can choose one of the items listed to work on in the session. The session then focuses on the chosen item using whatever skills and/or techniques seem appropriate, and the client is then helped to design ‘homework’ to take place before the next session. The session ends with the coach eliciting feedback on how the client has experienced the session and what has been helpful. CBC is a collaborative process so it is important that the client takes control of the subject matter, and provides feedback to the coach on his or her approach.

The coach also takes into account the learning style (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002) of the individual. For example, some clients prefer to have more information about the concepts behind the coaching style being used and want to engage in what could be termed ‘bibliocoaching’, an adaptation of the term ‘bibliotherapy’ (Pardeck, 1998) where reading

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FIG 1

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Further information

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- The British Association for Cognitive and Behavioural Psychotherapies (www.bacbp.com)
- The Beck Institute for Cognitive Therapy and Research (www.bbeckinstitute.org)
- Centre for Coaching (www.centreforcoaching.com)

The Centre for Coaching’s training programmes are accredited by Middlesex University. Programmes are modular and can be taken as standalone items or put together to form a diploma in Coaching.

material is recommended to back up the programme. Other clients may want to engage in more experiential learning. If the coach can work with the client’s learning style it can lead to more successful goal attainment.

The individual is helped to identify and understand the impact of their thinking style in a given situation (Neenan & Dryden, 2006). Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs – self-defeating thoughts) are based on the ‘life rules’ or underlying assumptions we have devised to help us function in our environment, which, in turn, are based on the core beliefs we hold about ourselves, others and the world.

An example

Figure 1 (above) shows a cognitive model that can be applied as follows.

An individual has been asked to spearhead a new project alongside a number of other complicated projects he is responsible for. The organisation would like the individual to take on the project but it is not essential that he does so. However, there are other people in the organisation that could be approached.

- **Core belief:** “I am a hard worker and success comes to those who work hard”
- **Underlying assumption or life rule:** “If I am offered an opportunity then I should take it”
- **NATs:** “I can’t say no”

The person holds a ‘core belief’ that he is a hard worker and that success is dependent on hard work. This leads him to develop an ‘underlying assumption’ that whenever he is offered an opportunity he should take it. This could be seen as a rule that has served him well during the early part of his career while he was becoming established. By accepting opportunity, he has raised his profile and created opportunities to expand his knowledge. However, now that he is of senior status with increasing levels of demand being made of him, it is not practical nor helpful to accept every opportunity. Continuing to do so could potentially lead to the loss of the good opinion of others by not being able to deliver on time, by producing less satisfactory outcomes, or by simply leading to personal burnout.

Case study 2: Change

Simon was the branch director of a group of 45 London branches of a major retail financial services organisation. He had previously successfully managed a smaller group of 30 branches in the South East and this had led to his recent promotion.

Since Simon's appointment, a major restructuring programme had been announced, leading to the closure of five of his branches and others being downgraded to minor outlets. In addition, there was to be a major refurbishment of the flagship branch. These changes were causing friction among his staff.

Simon was enthusiastic and highly ambitious, and his high-energy style had always served him well in the past. He came across as naturally self-confident. However, he confided in his mentor that he was starting to lack confidence in his ability to tackle these new challenges. It was agreed that he should have a number of sessions with a change coach to support him in his new role.

At the initial meeting between Simon, his mentor and the change coach it was established that the two areas to be explored were his leadership style and his change management skills. Using a behavioural contract, two of his outcomes were stated as, 'To identify my leadership style together with the associated strengths and weaknesses', and 'to identify my thinking style, its strengths and weaknesses and develop the thinking skills required to enhance personal performance.'

Simon completed a managerial style questionnaire and sought 360-degree feedback from his senior team. The results highlighted the fact that while Simon perceived his style to be fairly inclusive and democratic, his new team saw him as highly directive and having little tolerance for under-performance. Although this style had worked for him in the past, Simon needed a more collaborative approach with his new and more experienced management team.

Simon had received minimal training in the skills required to effectively lead change. His coach recommended a reading list for him to work through in his own time.

In combining his desire to develop a more inclusive leadership style with his increasing knowledge of effective change management, he worked with his coach to develop a strategy for the restructuring programme. This included identifying a core team from across his group who would guide and inform the process. The team was responsible for identifying a vision for the newly structured group, communicating this in their teams, and feeding back best practice and obstacles.

CBC was used to underpin all of the above by helping Simon consider his beliefs about people, their actions, his expectations of self and of others, and the reasons for these. Simon discovered that one of his life rules about other people that drove him in his day-to-day work was, 'if I am the boss then you should do things my way'. He realised that this left little scope for others to bring their own unique contributions to the team, leading to frustration.

Simon was still reluctant to step back from chairing the core teams meetings as he felt that would make him appear weak ('If I am a leader then I must be seen to be taking the lead otherwise people will think I am ineffective'). So using the skills and techniques of CBC, he was able to develop a different mental picture of an effective leader. Through coaching, he was able to reframe that belief to one that acknowledged that through empowering and trusting his team he could provide far greater leadership.

After eight coaching sessions, it was agreed to review progress with his mentor. His new-found knowledge in change had given him the understanding and confidence he needed to complete the restructure programme. An additional 360-feedback session reflected the increased respect and belief in Simon from his senior team.

In this case the individual was aware that he always took on too much and that he was now reaching his personal and professional limits. However, when he considered turning down opportunities he felt anxious and found himself saying yes and then worrying excessively about how to manage his workload.

Once the relationship between his core belief(s), his underlying assumption(s) and the ways his thoughts were triggered in such situations were uncovered, he was able to stand back and see how such thoughts were unhelpful. It was now possible to develop the following alternative underlying assumption: *"If I am offered an opportunity then I need to evaluate it and consider whether it is useful to me and the organisation to accept it."*

Creating a new underlying assumption, together with a practical framework for evaluating opportunities, such as asking for 'thinking it over

time' so that he could work out the pros and cons of taking on anything new, meant he was able to deliver what was needed when it was needed.

Identifying cognitive distortions

In CBC, emphasis is put on identification of self-defeating thinking and thoughts are elicited by using tools such as a 'thoughts record form' where the individual is taught how to identify his or her thinking style (see Figure 2, p43).

The individual is also asked to begin to identify the types of cognitive distortions they engage in which colour their perception of situations (Neenan & Dryden, 2004).

These could include the following:

- **Discounting the positive**

"If I can do it, it doesn't count"

- **All or nothing thinking**

"I pass or I fail", "You win or you lose", "It's right or it's wrong", "I do it all now or do none at all"

Case study 3: Communication

James, a senior director in an international financial services group responsible for structured finance execution, was referred for coaching by his line manager. Although he was seen as being technically able, he came across as cold and disinterested, and this had had a negative impact on the people he met. One of the objectives of his coaching was to help James develop better interpersonal skills in order to make him a more effective marketer. A coaching contract of eight one-and-a-half hour coaching sessions was agreed. His behavioural contract included the following two outcomes: 'To identify and develop relevant interpersonal skills associated with effective relationship building' and 'to develop a framework for understanding my own thinking processes and that of others to enable the recognition of the similarities and differences and associated possible outcomes'.

During his early sessions with his coach, James came to recognise that to progress further in the organisation, he needed to develop his business origination skills. Psychometric profiling helped identify his personality type and James came to realise that his approach had a tendency to alienate individuals. By considering the impact he had on others, he was able to develop an awareness of his own 'natural' style of communicating and recognise that different people had their own preferences in communication.

The main hurdle James had to overcome was to appreciate that the origination of business was only partly to do with technical ability. He came to understand that a prospective client in the highly competitive banking market is going to rely on personal relationships in choosing the person and organisation they wish to work with. The focus of his coaching sessions became the development of desired behaviours to improve personal relationships. A series of behavioural exercises was created in relation to networking, in particular, the concept of using 'small talk' around non-technical subjects such as finding out about the other person and looking for subjects of personal interest, was explored. To assist this process, James was helped to identify his thinking style. Two of his beliefs were, 'I am at work to work and not to socialise' and 'other people will think well of me if I am technically able and I must demonstrate this at all times'.

By the end of the coaching contract, James had managed to modify his behaviour and communication style to one that placed more emphasis on building individual relationships. The feedback received from his manager and from others in the organisation demonstrated a positive change in the way James related to people. In addition, James found that his more open personal style was receiving a more positive pay-off in terms of securing business.

- **Labelling**

*"I did something bad therefore I am bad",
"I said something silly therefore I am foolish"*

- **Mind reading**

"She didn't look at me therefore I have done something wrong"

- **Fortune telling**

"I just know it will be awful"

- **Catastrophising**

"Oh my God this is SO terrible"

- **Personalisation**

"It's all my fault", "I am the one to blame"

- **Blame**

"It's all his/her/my fault"

- **Generalisation**

"I never get what I want", "It's always the same"

About the author

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- **Shoulds, Musts, Have tos and Oughts**

"I/you/she/he/they must... have to... ought to."

Once the individual becomes aware of their ways of distorting reality they can put in countermeasures. Instead of seeing a mistake as something awful (catastrophising) and perceiving the situation as being all their fault (personalisation), they could stand back from the situation and think: *"I am not happy about the error but it is not the end of the world and I was only responsible for part of what happened. What went wrong and what can I learn that will assist me the next time?"*

This way, it is likely that the individual will be in a better place to correct the error, learn from it and devise systems and/or structures for the future.

The challenges of CBC

In CBC there are three types of challenges that are used to help the client re-evaluate their thinking (Simos, 2002).

FIG 2

Problem	Self-defeating thinking	Emotional behavioural reaction	Healthy response	New approach to problem
A	B	C	D	E
Giving a public lecture	<p>I must perform well or the outcome will be awful</p> <p>Logical: Just because I want to perform well, how does it logically follow that I must perform well?</p> <p>Empirical: Where is the evidence that my demand must be granted? Am I being realistic? If I don't perform well will the outcome be really awful?</p> <p>Pragmatic: Where is it getting me holding on to this belief?</p>	Anxious, inability to concentrate	<p>Logical: Although it is strongly preferable to do well, I don't have to.</p> <p>Empirical: There is no evidence that I will get what I demand even if it is preferable and desirable.</p> <p>Pragmatic: If I don't perform well, the outcome may be bad, but hardly devastating! If I continue holding on to this belief, I will remain anxious and be even more likely to perform badly.</p>	If I change my attitude I will feel less concerned and not anxious. Also, I will be able to concentrate and prepare for the lecture.

1. Empirical/evidence based “Where is the evidence that you must not make a mistake otherwise you are a failure?”

2. Logical “Just because you would like never to make a mistake how does it logically follow that you must not make a mistake?”

3. Pragmatic “Even if it were true that making a mistake means being a failure, do you feel better or worse for believing it, and does it help you stop making mistakes?”

These can help the individual engage in realistic thinking, which is more likely to assist them in reaching sensible, informed, and sustainable decisions.

A CBC coach recognises that the types of demands we make of ourselves, others and the world are likely to generate either positive or negative outcomes (Dryden, 1999). For example, I demand of myself that: “I must do well, if I do not then it is awful” or “I must be approved of by others, if I am not then I have less worth.” But these thoughts are likely to result in stress, anxiety, depression, shame and guilt.

Demands of others such as: “You must treat me justly, if you do not then it is not fair and you deserve to be punished,” are likely to result in anger and passive-aggressive behaviour. For those who believe that: “Life must be as I want it

to be and if it is not then that's awful,” the outcomes are likely to be self-pity, addictive behaviour, depression and a tendency to procrastinate.

Conclusions

CBC can be used as a main approach to coaching an individual or as part of another approach. A number of coaches who do not identify themselves as being cognitive behavioural use many of the skills and techniques from this approach in their work due to their effectiveness.

Some do not subscribe to the CBC approach, believing it to be too focused and directive in its nature. They believe coaching is totally reflective in nature. There is also a belief that CBC only works in relation to a psychological coaching model and cannot be applied in the business coaching arena.

For those who support CBC it is seen as a ‘life skills’ approach that can be used on its own or integrated into a range of other approaches. These individuals recognise that technical skills do not exist without a person to apply them and that, on many occasions, it is not the technical skills that an individual is lacking but the struggle with some kind of faulty thinking or perception that makes the task more onerous than it need be. ■